I've Come Back Changed, I Can Feel It In My Bones
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I've Come Back Changed, I Can Feel It In My Bones

by woodwoofits

Summary

Alex Forbes spends most holidays by himself. Not this year.

Notes

This movie has ruined my brain. Enjoy.

(This can either be romantic or just whatever they had going on in the movie that was absolutely not platonic)

Title from "Meet Me in The Woods" by Lord Huron

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

It's cold. Of course it's cold. It's always cold. There's never sun here. Always cloudy, raining, or snowing. He hates it.

Most of the boys go home for the holidays. Not Alex, of course. He gets to stay. While they leave to be enveloped in the warmth of their homes, their families, and lights, he has to stay in the empty halls of this cursed place. Christmas lights half-heartedly hung down the halls, and the barely decorated tree that he could almost touch the top of in the main hall.

At least it gives him plenty of time to explore. But he's been exploring for years. He knows every single place that could hold any touch of interest. The longer he spends wandering listlessly through the halls, the more his resentment grows.

Eating by himself things that barely pass as food. Sleeping curled up under his sheets does little to warm him because it's not like they'll keep the heat on all break for one poor bastard. Wearing holes in his socks because he has to wear two pairs before he drags himself off campus to the nearest store.

He doesn't like the train. Not anymore.

When he was younger, he used to imagine that nothing had changed. His friends were still there, laughing with him between classes. Josh would cause a small fire in the basement and have to scramble into the upstairs bathroom to get water before it spread. They'd open presents they got for each other from the corner store, sticks of gum, a bag of crisps. Pop that they weren't supposed to have. But he hadn't thought like that in a long time.

This year is different. Everything is different. It's still cold; there's no changing that. But he isn't alone. He notices it within the first week of break. Glimpses of a sweater around the corner, doors closing as he enters a room, footsteps down the hall.

It doesn't take long to figure out who it is. Just his luck; it had to be that guy. It infuriates him. At some point, he had started to view the palatial school as his own in the winter. He was the only one there most years, to be fair. These halls were his to wander without abandon, hollow in people and emotion. He doesn't see him until the following week, but Alex is thankful for the distance.

Breakfast, which he always has late in the day during break, is barely passable most days. He stays up late into the night to watch the sky and wakes up late when his body can no longer handle the cold. Aching, as if his very bones had frozen over.

But he'd fought against it today, wishing to stay down and forget about the world a little longer. So he's eating too soggy oatmeal and one of the last apples much later than usual. He'll have to pick some up soon.

The doors clack open, and the squeak of the hinge pauses. Alex lazily brings his gaze up to stare back at the boy he knows is skirting around him with ease. Nigel's expression is blank, but it's easy to see that he wasn't expecting Alex to still be eating.

They stare emotionlessly at each other for a few moments before Alex looks back down into his overcooked oatmeal. He pokes the spoon around in it, "I woke up late."

He knows that Nigel has his schedule down like no one ever had. Not even Alex. He probably does that to everyone. He remembers seeing little notes on Josh and Raj when they had his notebook. But it was more remarks on what they had done that day, in classes and such. Little things, like Raj dropping a pencil.

But he had been much closer to Alex. They did share a room, after all. But he hadn't mentioned anyone else's possible "delusions of grandeur." Or precisely when they go to bed or how long they do their homework. No prods to anyone else's psyche.

He wonders what those notes look like now. After Josh. After Jack. After Susan. He rubs the area above his eyebrows, gazing into the bowl. The doors clack closed after a moment, and Alex hears Nigel's shoes squeak against the tiled floor as he passes.

Once his back is toward Alex, he finally looks up at Nigel as he moves behind the serving area into the kitchen. He can hear some things clatter as the industrial fridge opens. Bottles rattling against each other. It shuts not long after.

Ignoring most of the sounds to the best of his ability, sluggishly eating his oatmeal, saving the apple for last. He finishes the oatmeal before Nigel comes back. Alex prays to whatever is out there that he doesn't-.

He does. Nigel sits right across from him. Tray and all. A quick glance shows that Nigel somehow scrounged a fruit cup from somewhere in

the kitchen. And two slices of toast. That would have been smarter than oatmeal. Why did he get oatmeal in the first place? He hates it.

He hadn't been thinking right in a long time.

Nigel looks at him, leaning over the table, expression unreadable as usual. His eyes flick down to the reluctantly finished bowl of oatmeal and back up.

He leans back slightly, grabbing a piece of toast, "Have a late night, Jack?"

Alex doesn't look up at him, trying to focus on savouring the one decent thing he will probably eat today. He can almost feel Nigel's smug expression. It's like he's proud that he gets under Alex's skin so easily.

The boy across from him finishes his toast before opening his mouth again. Head cocked to the side, "Does he always leave you all alone?"

Lips pressed into a line, Alex looks up. He tries to conjure up some vitriol, but it just comes out tired and irritated. "What do you think you're doing?"

Nigel leans back, a light smile pulling at his lips. Blood boils, but he's too tired to do anything about it. Exhaustion and chill beat the anger down with quick success.

"And I'm not alone," Alex looks down at the apple core in his hand, "My father is in his office."

He gets a hum in response. Blue-grey eyes drill into him, a pale hand picking up the fruit cup before Nigel speaks, "How often do you see him? Does he look for you?"

His grip on the apple tightens, jaw grinding. Nigel knows the answer; he's been pretty much stalking him for the past week.

Alex rolls his eyes, finally staring back at him, "You know he doesn't. Why are you even here?"

"I'm eating breakfast," Nigels replies helpfully.

"That's not what I meant, you dick," Alex spits. The apple core has turned brown in his hand, which he drops into the bowl, clattering against the spoon.

"My father thought it'd be best if I spent some time alone." Nigel's rigid demeanour from the way beginning resurfacing. It's almost a disconcerting change. Almost.

"You do that," Alex replies, standing from the table. The spoon slides around in the bowl as he swipes it from the table, marching back to the kitchen.

"Jack," Nigel calls to him. Alex falters lightly, "Would you like to do something today?"

He turns, gently fuming like he has been for the past few minutes. "Not with you."

Alex doesn't even look at him as he slams out of the lunch room.

He sits on the desk by the window, head against the frosted glass, wrapped in his blanket. Watching the groundskeeper shovel the meagre snow off the pavement. He's bundled up in a puffer jacket, ear muffs, hat, and scarf. Plus, bright yellow gloves that scream out against the relatively dark outfit.

It's not that he's particularly entertaining to watch; there's nothing else to do. And going into town often leads to Alex wandering around, barely spending whatever money he had taken from his father's wallet when the man went to the bathroom.

His head is numb when he realises that the man has moved on. He must have zoned out or fallen asleep. It's already dark out. He'd had to have been there the majority of the day. The clicking noise he makes with his tongue displays his disgust. It gets dark so early.

Under the blanket, his legs and back protest the awkward position, groaning as he unfurls from the spot on the desk.

As he turns to shuffle off the surface, he catches a spot of white under his door. Resisting the irritated noise that wants to rise out of him, he slides off the desk. He bends down to grab the folded paper with the blanket still wrapped around him. The bed is lumpy underneath him as he slumps into it.

With cold hands, he unfolds the piece of paper. Writing that he'll never forget stares back at him. Alex scoffs at the addressing, 'My Dearest Jack.' Eyes lightly skimming the rest of it. Something about meeting Nigel on the second floor of the East Wing at 7:30PM. He's

got to be kidding. There's no way Alex would willingly spend time with that freak, least of all alone.

He lays on his side, staring at the note before he lets it flutter to the ground. He only wants to sleep, but his body can't. Just his luck when he's actually in a semi-comfortable position. He sighs, looking over at his clock.

7:16PM blinks back at him spitefully. He's not moving. Absolutely not.

No way.

Not by any means.

He'll stay there, unsleeping all night if he has to. He isn't moving.

Only a few minutes have passed when Alex's stomach grumbles unhelpfully. He hasn't eaten in hours. And the kitchen is in the East Wing. Fucking hell.

His socked feet thump against the floor down to the kitchen. He will just get a bite and then return to his room. That's all. It ends up being the last apple he shoves into his mouth with alarming speed in the kitchen's quiet, not even bothering to sit down. He should eat more but can't muster the energy to grab anything else.

As he makes his way back to his room, he pauses at the stairwell. Looking up to the next flight. He doesn't have his watch on him. He's probably 'late,' but lateness requires the intention of being there in the first place.

Alex hesitates.

If he returns to his room, he will just be alone and cold. Bored out of his mind. As always. Nothing ever changes. Another glance up the stairs.

This is such a terrible idea.

He's not quite sure where on the second floor Nigel wants him, but he stands by the stairs, looking down the halls for any sign of the other boy. Nigel can come to him if he wants to see him so badly.

Alex hears him first. Light footsteps down the hall to his right. Sure enough, the dark-haired boy rounds the corner not long after.

His face lightens, pleased that Alex showed up. He's holding two flashlights, "Curiosity killed the cat, Jack."

Alex doesn't respond. As usual. Content to let Nigel do whatever it is that he invited him up here for. Content might be a bit of a stretch, but he isn't going to fight against it.

Nigel quirks a smile, "This way."

Down the corridor, passing classrooms that Alex thinks he has been in at least once. Nigel pushes the door to a room at the very end of one hall, tucked into a corner. It's a smaller classroom for students who require a quiet environment, away from the rowdy boys who frequent the halls.

Alex stands in the middle of the room in a rumpled sweater and socks, arms crossed in an attempt to ignore the cold, while Nigel pushes the large chalkboard to the side. A thin door behind it blends in so well with the wall that Alex hadn't noticed it peeking out from under the board. Nigel leans down to jiggle the handle a few times before it opens.

A set of stairs.

Has he been here before? Perhaps not. Maybe this used to be a storage or break room of some sort, so he never ventured this far. The realisation sparks some excitement in him. Perhaps not an absolutely terrible idea.

Nigel motions for him to go first, looking proud. Alex doesn't let his smug look take away the first exciting thing all break. Something other than cold and boredom. Something different. Something new.

They curve, a spiral staircase, completely unlit. He clicks on the flashlight, taking care going up the steps. They're railed and feel like they go on forever. Near what must be the top, he hears a strange noise, mechanical. A low hum. The stairs cut off abruptly, opening into a larger room. It's rather barren save for a few windows, but big. He looks around before Nigel comes up behind him, turning in the other direction.

He turns to look at him but stops when he realises where they are. An extensive system of gears sits a few feet away from the stairs, slowly moving. An even larger pole connects it to the back of the massive clock they are standing in front of.

His slight jaw drop is unconscious; he had not realised this room was accessible. Or existed. How did Nigel even find this?

A look at the other boy shows he's even more pleased with himself. He's smiling. Even in the low light, Alex can tell.

"I assume you've never been up here?" Nigel asks as he walks further into the room. He spins slowly, flashlight swinging. He's wearing that long coat, the only one he seems to have. It flutters around him like a bat's wings, ingrained in its body.

Alex shakes his head, softly responding, "I didn't even know it was here."

He'd never leave if he had.

"C'mon," Nigel says, flashlight pointed to an open door on one side of the room. He tips his head, "In here."

All Alex can do is follow in awe. Although it feels warmer up here somehow. Heat rises or something, he assumes. But he's surprised when he walks through the door and finds a lengthier room. It's shorter than the previous one but triangle-shaped. It was almost like an attic, with several stray boxes scattered around. Warm light emits from a fireplace at the room's far end.

Nigel kneels before the fire, hands outstretched to feel the heat. There's some sort of fabric underneath him. A blanket?

"Come," Nigel pats the spot next to him on the blanket, "Sit."

The side of his face was lit by the fire. A vision from Hell. Staring up at him from the deepest circle. Lucifer himself, God's beloved soldier. Beautiful and persuasive. Like a doomed moth, he stumbles forward, sinking to his knees in the warmth.

He only then realises there's a bundle of blankets as if Nigel raided the linen closet just to build this. Alex doesn't think as he takes one and wraps it around himself. Sighing into the soft material, bundled tightly, he feels truly warm for the first time all week.

Too busy unthawing, he doesn't notice when Nigel sets something in front of him. Something in cling film. He only sees it when Nigel sits beside him, jostling him to the side as he settles.

Unfurling a hand from his cocoon of blankets, he picks it up. A

sandwich? His brow furrows, lips pursing. He looks over at Nigel and is greeted by his unnerving stare, like in the basement.

"What's this for?" Alex asks quietly, and he feels a bit silly for asking. It's a sandwich; it's meant for eating, but why is Nigel, of all people giving him one?

"You don't eat a whole lot, do you, Jack?" It's almost not a question. And Nigel would know better than most the answer.

Alex looks down at the bread in his hand. He replies quietly, "Not much worth eating here."

"Aw, come on now," Nigel sways into Alex, bumping shoulders, "You'll break Mr. Lewis' heart if he hears you talking like that."

Alex laughs, bringing his other hand out to unwrap the sandwich, "He can't cook worth shite, and he knows it."

Nigel huffs a laugh. Something genuine. Not forced, not smug, not exasperated. Real.

Alex stares down at the sandwich cradled in his hands. "Did… did you make this?"

His gaze flicks over to another sandwich that Nigel is holding. He hadn't even registered that he had one as well.

"They had chicken at the market today," Nigel says, a little distant, his gaze a little vacant. "And there was still mayonnaise in the fridge."

He made them sandwiches. Not just for himself but for Alex as well.

"I…" He starts but isn't quite sure how to finish. Nigel's gaze snaps back into startling attention, peering down at how his mouth forms around words that don't come out.

"You made me a sandwich." He processes, laughing slightly. Nigel continues his stare uninterrupted by the utterance. "You're one strange guy."

Nigel smiles lightly, like he's happy to be called a freak. Maybe it's because it's Alex who's doing it.

"Of course, I already knew you were absolutely mental," Alex shakes his head, "Not sure why I'm surprised anymore."

It's a bloody sandwich. On the list of things Nigel's done, this should barely tip the bizarre scale. But it does. Maybe it's the normality of it that gives it so much weight in his brain.

His stomach growls at him again, cutting off his thinking and drawing a laugh from Nigel. The boy's shoulders move lightly against his. He watches Nigel unwrap his own sandwich and begin to eat.

He watches Nigel stare off into the fire as he chews. He watches the way the flames play with shadows across his face. He watches the reflection of it in his eyes.

Nigel smirks without looking at him, sparking some sort of embarrassment that makes him also start eating.

Once he bites down, he realises just how hungry he still is. Ravenous as he takes bite after bite of chicken. He finishes it faster than he'll ever admit, crushing the cling film in his hand.

He knows Nigel's looking at him. When isn't he? They always find each other in a room without fail. Every time.

"Good?" Nigel asks with a smile, knees pulled up to rest his arms on.

Alex coughs, "Yeah."

They sit in silence for a while. Of which Alex is grateful, Nigel's been kind of normal the whole time. Other than being a smug asshole, but that's most kids in school anyway.

"Here," Nigel hands him a bottle, which Alex gives a slightly dubious look. The dark-haired boy laughs, "It's just water."

He takes it, fingers lightly brushing against Nigel's. The water is cold but not terribly so. He can see Nigel's smile as he drinks. Half of the bottle is gone when he gives it back.

Alex returns his warming limbs under the blanket before clearing his throat, "Thank you."

Nigel's head snaps to him, surprised. The first expressive emotion other than smug confidence.

"Of course, Jack." His brows furrow together, "We are destined to care for each other."

And there's more of the destiny bullshit. Whatever, Alex is too tired to

resist, yawning into his hands, clutching the blanket. He hasn't felt comfortable in so long. So warm…

His eyes blink open, light blinding him, forcing him to snap them shut again. He groans lightly as he stretches, yawning. When his eyes finally adjust, he opens them.

Met with dying embers in the fireplace. The bundle of blankets that he had apparently fallen asleep in. Some were packed together in some sort of pillow that he was lying on.

Gaze wandering around the room; it's light out. Morning already. Had he really fallen asleep that fast? He had felt pretty tired, and the warmth didn't help keep him awake.

Feeling strangely well-rested, he pushes himself up, stretching again. For a wooden floor, it wasn't entirely uncomfortable with the layers of blankets.

Blinks a few more times, rubbing at his eyes as Alex searches the room.

He's alone.

Nigel must have left earlier. Had he slept up here, too? Or did he leave after Alex fell asleep?

He unravels himself from the bundle of blankets, definitely more than he had wrapped himself in previously. Alex decides to leave them there; Nigel brought them up here, and he can handle it.

Alex looks at the bundle, leaning down to grab the leftover flashlight and leaves. The clock mechanism hums as he passes, large and looming.

Using his hands as his guide down the dark stairs, Alex navigates the small staircase. He exits the door, expecting to knock into the back of the board. But it hasn't moved since Nigel pushed it to the side.

He decides to push it back, wheels thudding against the slats of wood on the floor.

Nigel is nowhere to be found. He checks his room, no one. The library, the main hall, the small greenhouse that is mostly disused, and even

Alex's room. Nowhere.

It is almost a complete flip of the past few months. He saw him everywhere. No matter where he looked, Nigel was there. Watching in his peripheral vision.

There's a strange feeling in Alex's gut. Something akin to disappointment. But over what, he's not quite sure. Is he really that upset over not seeing that creep?

Whatever. It's a good thing to not see him. He sits on his bed, slowly becoming colder the longer he's down here. Acclimating to the frigid temperature of the school. He already misses the attic-like room. If only for the fireplace.

There's nothing to do here. He could read in the library, but he usually ends up spacing out. Mind running wild with the information he takes in. Imagination growing and swallowing him in its gaping jaws.

Not much keeps his attention these days. He isn't sure how long he has spaced out before a gentle knock on his door, shaking him from his thoughts.

The door opens slowly, exposing the dark-haired and neutral-faced Nigel.

"What's the point of knocking if you're just going to come in anyway?"

"You weren't in the attic," Nigel says, ignoring Alex's annoyance. He lifts his hands, "I brought you something."

A tray. From the kitchen.

What is it with this guy? Feeding him like this? He can take care of himself and has for nearly 18 years now. Alex doesn't need a babysitter, least of all this fucking weirdo.

Alex sneers, "I don't need coddling, Nigel. I can take care of myself."

"Yes," Nigel replies, setting the tray on Alex's bed stand before turning to him. "You can. But you don't. Not recently."

Maybe it's because it's the first time he's been well-rested in a few weeks or the bullshit aura Nigel exudes. Like he knows everything, which makes him better than everyone else. But Alex feels his anger boil and stay at a rolling heat, no longer dampened by exhaustion.

He stands up, chest to chest with the other boy. Eyes flicking between one another, he searches the expressionless face. His lips pull back, one side curling lightly.

"What do you know?" Alex whispers, a fury building in his body that he hasn't felt in a long time.

"A lot of things," Nigel replies coolly. "You're incredibly self-centred. You believe yourself better than your peers, and that isolates you. Even before poor Josh left us, you were isolated. You think you'll end up differently than your father, alone, with little drive, and stuck. An asshole. But you don't even realise how alike you are, and that scares you. You take pity on yourself before anyone or anything else. Tell me, Jack, did you weep for Josh? For Susan?"

His face, a stone statue carved by expert hands, stays neutral, unchanging. All the while, Alex grows furious. A light trembling takes over his hands, terrific anger needing an outlet that wasn't immediately hitting Nigel in the face.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?"

He shoves at the boy's chest and grows even more pissed when he receives no reaction. "Some sacred descendent of the Templars? The mouthpiece of the heavens? Tell me, oh saintly one, what is He saying? What does He think of us? His sick creations do nothing but destroy each other at every opportunity. That do anything to get just a little more."

He can nearly touch noses with the other boy before he shoves him again, "More money, more friends, more fame, more, more, more."

He shoves harder with each word until Nigel ends up pressed against the desk, yet remains still. The air around him is still smug and knowing.

"You know as I, what He thinks," Nigel says quietly, facade cracking, brows furrowing as he leans in lightly, "That fury, the righteous anger you feel. It's Him. He feels as we do, the hypocrisy, the greed, it's shameful."

"That's why we're here, why we've been destined to meet, Jack," He becomes fervent like he had been in the basement. The spark returns to his eye, "We're meant to be together, the instruments to a higher cause."

"And the destiny shit!" Alex exclaims, throwing his hands up as he moves away from the boy. He's so sick of it. "You are seriously deluded."

"Why am I deluded?" He even sounds upset, facade unfolded and open. "Do you genuinely believe that it was just a coincidence that we've met? That our fathers just so happened to know each other, leading to this very moment? It has to be something other than happenstance. You must feel it. I know you do."

Alex sighs, looking down at the wooden floor, arms crossed. "I don't know what I feel. Ever since you got here, everything's just been fucked."

Nigel stays leaned against the desk, lax with his hands gripping the edge lightly. He huffs a laugh, sardonic and little, "It's been the same for me."

Eyes pierce him as he lifts his head, ready to protest.

"I was never a talkative child," Nigel explains, hands coming to clasp in front of him, "I preferred books to other children, surprising, I'm sure."

Alex cannot help but laugh, resting on his bed once again. Focus entirely on the boy across from him.

"I could get lost in the ancient histories. They seemed much more fascinating than anything someone else could offer. The Templars, the Cathars… playing cards." He smiles at Alex, soft and entirely out of place on his face. The usual smug smirk is nowhere to be seen. "And then I found medical texts, not sure when, but I remember hiding them under my bed from my father. It was fascinating."

He trails off wistfully like he's lost in the memory. His eyes bright with enthusiasm, lighting up like constellations. It's not something that Alex is used to or precisely comfortable with. He's not at all comfortable with the odd feeling settling in his chest. Anxiety maybe. Maybe.

Nigel focuses on Alex, "Until I met you. Truly met you. Saw you for who you were and who you are meant to be, Jack. The one I had dreamed of meeting but never believed would happen. I thought there could never be someone else like me, and then there you were. Right in front of me, as you told the Reverend Donaldson off. It was incredible."

Alex can't respond. Doesn't know how. Which is often the response to this guy if he's not punching him in the face.

"Everything has changed since our meeting. It wasn't coincidence, Jack. We're meant for so much more than this, you know that. You felt it when you read my book."

Alex is hardly surprised that Nigel knows he read it. He probably knows when Alex last went to the goddamn bathroom. He's everywhere. Looking for him. Watching him. Analyzing his every move.

He can't help his attention drifting to the tray on the side table. A small plate of toast and cut apples. Alex laughs, drained from the conversation and hungry.

"Eat, Jack," Nigel says pointedly.

He doesn't resist. The toast crunches satisfyingly underneath his teeth.

It's odd. This tentative truce settles in between them. Well, not exactly a ceasefire. It's more akin to mutually assured destruction, with much prodding. Yet, something prevents them from separating much, be it loneliness or something else entirely.

They eat breakfast together most days, having slept in the attic room each night before.

They go to town together, Alex a little more settled knowing where Nigel is and not having to worry about him going off and doing something absolutely illegal. He can keep an eye on him and relax, knowing that he likely won't do something that would get both of them in serious trouble. At least not in public.

It's odd. Not at all how he thought he'd spend his break, but he knows one thing. He's not alone, and that's an improvement.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The third week marked Christmas. When he was younger, he'd sit in the main hall, staring in awe at the small tree decorated with a single strand of lights. He hadn't known much else, the beauty not yet lost on him. There were no bulbs, no ornaments, just a few tiny golden lights that shined harshly against the dark room. It lit the painting behind it, war rimmed in a golden glow. Holy.

Nowadays, the shine and polish of the tradition has waned on him. Or at least it had. The "decorations" in the school left much to be desired. And given that every year was just as cold and miserable as the previous, it wasn't a time of year he looked forward to.

This year is different. Of course it is. It's warm. There's a fire that he looks forward to every night and tolerable food that Nigel shows him from whatever they manage to get their hands on. Alex is used to throwing random things that don't go together and calling it a day. Nigel, however, used his previous solitude to pick up more skills than just gross dissection and stuffing.

So it shouldn't come as a surprise when, the night before Christmas, Nigel looks at him with this intensity. "I want to go somewhere."

Alex's eyebrows raise. His eyes flit down to the watch on his wrist. "Where? It's almost midnight."

Nigel smiles, eyes glinting in the firelight, "All the better."

He rolls his eyes, sighing. He whines, "It'll be cold."

"Up, up," Nigel unfolds his legs from the bundle of blankets in the attic area. "We're going out."

Alex can't help but groan. He wanted nothing more than to stay inside and warm. Outside could wait another day, couldn't it?

Obviously not to Nigel, who all but pulls him up from the blanket cocoon he made. "You'll like it, I promise."

"I don't much like the sound of that," Alex huffs lightly, allowing

himself to be dragged downstairs, begrudgingly putting on his shoes and overcoat. They had each purchased scarfs early last week, which he wraps snuggly under his chin.

They end up alone on a train car into town. The rumbling of the wheels beneath them almost lolling him into sleep, but Nigel keeps him awake.

"Black widows are so efficient with their oxygen consumption that they can go an entire week in a jar and not suffocate," He explains, "Just opening it will give them enough for another week."

"You say that as if you have experience," Alex jokes. Nobody in their right mind would keep a black widow as a pet. They aren't even native to England. Where would he get one anyway?

"We went on a trip to Italy once when I was younger," As if he knew exactly what Alex was thinking. Nigel stares out the window, "I scooped it into a jar while my father wasn't looking. Hid it in my jacket when we got back on the plane."

"You smuggled a spider out of Italy?" Alex laughs at him. Nigel looks at him with genuine content and nods.

"I did. Kept it in the closet when we got home." He says with a kind of rebellious pride. Nigel continues with a grandiose voice, "*Latrodectus tredecimguttatus*."

He sighs reverently, head against the train window. Nigel's breath fogs the window, "She was beautiful."

"Did you pin her?" Alex asks genuinely. He's seen only part of what must be an extensive collection. He must have missed it amongst the boxes and boxes of specimens.

Nigel nods, "She was the first. I had to cut her abdomen open and fill it with cotton so it wouldn't deflate. I'll show her to you sometime."

Alex nods again. Only a little disgusted. Just a little, which is progress, he guesses. The guy did do taxidermy in their room for months. That is one thing he does not miss in the slightest.

He jolts when the train stops; he hadn't realized how long they had been talking. The dark-haired boy across from him smiles conspiratorially.

Nigel leads him into town, deeper than they usually went when they just wanted to walk around, toward the town square. Before he can remark about their possible destination, Nigel falls out of step with him, placing his hands over Alex's eyes.

"What the bloody hell are you doing?" Alex asks, exasperated, as he stops walking. He can feel Nigel's coat brush up against his back as Nigel follows his movements to keep his hands in place.

"Can't spoil the surprise now, can we?" Nigel answers with a jovial question. The smug smile is back in his voice, the one that irks Alex to no end. Nigel waits until Alex gives up before shuffling forward.

They stumble around awkwardly in the relative darkness of the town, snow crunching under their shoes. The wind is light, but a few snow flurries continue to fall. Alex can feel his nose and ears have turned red from the cold.

"Almost there," Nigel reassures him. Wherever 'there' is. He feels himself led a few turns and finally stopping. They must be in the square.

"Can you take your hands off?" Alex brings his hands up to do it himself. Batting at the boy as Nigel lowers them, Alex keeps his eyes closed to play along. Whatever it is, it must be important to Nigel to drag him out here.

He feels Nigel stand next to him, coat arms brushing together, "Open your eyes."

Light. Brilliant, golden light. He almost has to squint to focus on it. Thousands of individual pinpricks battle the darkness, warring at all sides of the magnificent tree before them. Ornaments of all sizes and colors adorn every inch of the goliath pine.

The snow reflects the light, magnifying its majesty. Beauty in a way he hasn't experienced in a long time, what he always hoped for every year. How had he missed this for so many years?

"They put it up last weekend," Nigel speaks softly, to not break Alex from his reverie, "Apparently, they only started doing it last year."

That would explain why he had never seen it. He stopped going out for anything other than necessities on holiday long ago.

"It's…" Alex feels oddly vulnerable. Open. Pinned. Like he's trapped

under the pieces of paper Nigel used to pin his moths or butterflies. "Beautiful."

"See?" Nigel quirks a smile as he looks back at the tree, "I knew you'd like it."

Alex feels Nigel move beside him again and watches him slip a hand into a pocket inside his coat. He pulls something out of it, small and rectangular.

Gaudy red and green wrapping paper gapes up at him as Nigel turns to him. "And I hope you like this."

"You didn't," Alex stares at him, mouth agape, "No, you didn't - I can't… Why did you… I didn't get you anything."

He knows he's fumbling over his words, but his mouth can't match his brain. By the time one thought finishes, he's in the middle of the last. Cascading over him and out. A flood.

Nigel holds the neatly wrapped present out.

"You've never had something given to you without any expectations. There's always an exchange. Isn't that right, Alex?" Nigel quirks his head.

"It's Christmas, Nigel," He argues, "That's part of the idea."

Nigel holds firm, "You have granted me my gift. I need nothing else from you, Jack."

He can't help but shake his head in disbelief, eyebrows furrowing. "I've given you nothing."

"Oh, how wrong you are, my Jack," Nigel responds readily, leaning close, "I thought you understood. I told you, I have searched for you for so long, and you are finally, finally here. That's all I need."

"You're fucked," Alex shakes his head, "You're serious, aren't you?"

"This isn't about needing something in return. You've done more for me than you can imagine by merely existing, Jack." He can feel Nigel's breath against his face; Alex doesn't know where to look as he continues speaking. Eyes roaming the face softly lit in gold. His face scrunches as the wind bites at his eyes, causing a welling.

"You don't need to give me anything or do anything for me, no

exceptions." Nigel reaffirms. "Please, take it."

Alex looks down. Blinks. He can't quite tell what it is. Blinks. He swallows, eyes returning to Nigel's, "No exceptions?"

"None," Nigel says easily, somewhat cheery.

He continues looking at him for a moment before he lets his hands clasp around the present in his hand. As soon as he grips it, it is easy to tell that it's a book. Hardcover. He frowns at Nigel, lightly tearing the paper.

A blue cover meets him beneath the red and green, bearing no lettering to indicate the title. The spine is bare but ornate. He opens the cover as he asks, "What is it?"

"The first book on the Templars I read," Nigel says, "It is quite well-loved, I know it from cover to cover. I thought it would appreciate a new owner."

He flips through the weathered pages. They're incredibly soft, use and age evident in the downy feeling against his fingertips. Margins full of intricate lettering, years of delicate study, and notation. It's almost more important than the content printed on the pages. Ink nearly disregarded for the painstakingly penciled cursive.

It's been rebound. Maybe multiple times, knowing Nigel. Lovingly taken care of for who knows how many years.

Alex feels something well up in him. Perhaps it had been building the entire interaction, but it's a bone-deep feeling. Akin to anguish in its intensity, but he isn't suffering no matter how much it feels like it. It's like he's bleeding, yet there is no wound. The flow isn't ceasing. He's being torn up over a book.

No. Not over a book.

The *meaning* of the book.

He doesn't need to be anything other than who he is to be accepted. And worthy of acceptance. He had almost forgotten, in all honesty. Father and his little club look to him as the next big shot in their organisation.

Absolutely not. He's worth more than that. More than fodder for them to chew up and spit out when he becomes too much for them. Fuck

his 'obligations' and fuck them. His life is his own.

He chooses what he does in it. He chooses who he includes in it.

Alex blinks once again, clearing the light haze that covered his eyes.

"Thank you," And for the first time in years, he means it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading; I adore this movie, and it deserves more fics.

Please let me know what you thought and have a great day!

End Notes

Let me know what you thought! The second chapter should be up soon!

Please let me know if you notice any strange errors ty!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!